

Belize, thank you

Tropical country is an ideal host for the 'ultimate' nature adventure

Story and photos by Bill Becher Correspondent

Our guide motions us to be quiet as we paddle two-person inflatable kayaks around the bend in the river.

On a large rock jutting out from the dense green jungle, an 8-foot long crocodile suns itself.

This is just one of the many unforgettable sights on the Ultimate Adventure, a 10-day tour of the caves, reefs, jungle and rivers of Belize (formerly British Honduras), a tiny country tucked between Mexico and Guatemala.

If variety is the spice of life, this trip is pure habanero hot sauce.

"Every day you're doing something you've never done before," said Tina Williamson, one of the 12 adventurers on a recent trip. We had our choice of sea and river kayaking, windsurfing, snorkeling, mountain biking, diving, caving and hiking in a tropical rain forest.

Our first night was spent at the Tropical Education Center, part of the Belize Zoo. After dinner we took a special night zoo tour and saw jaguars, howler monkeys and ocelots. We also had the chance to hold and pet a boa constrictor. The extremely poisonous (or-deadly snake, on the other hand, stayed in its cage.

The next day we hiked through lush jungle and waded across a river several times en route to Actun Tunichil Mucnal, a cave that was rediscovered in the 1980s. Along the way, our guide suggested we nibble on a few of the termites that live in a nest attached to a tree. Termites taste like carrots.

Equipped with helmets and lights, we swam across a pool of water at the entrance to the cave. We walked — often in water to our armpits — about 500 yards into the cave. We wriggled through an opening and entered a dry area littered with Mayan artifacts — pottery fragments and several skulls and skeletons.

Our guide told us to turn off our lights, and we stood in the inky darkness, trying to imagine what it was like for the Mayans who used the cave for ceremonial and burial purposes more than 1,000 years ago.

Later that day a motor launch took us seven miles off the coast to Garbutt's Cay, a tiny island less than 75 feet wide in spots, where we camped in tents under palm trees that swayed in the blustery wind.

We spent two nights here, going over the basic skills of kayaking and snorkeling the mangroves and reefs where we saw barracuda and large schools of sardines.

Our Belizean guide dug a pit fresh ground and lit a fire to cook peppers for dinner, accompanied and aided by Greek salad, pasta, and chery and chocolate cheesecake. Delicious.

After we packed up our tents, the launch — escorted by flying fish — took us to Glover's Reef, a larger island, where we stayed two nights in tent cabins.

Anglers can wade the tidal flats at Glover's reef for bonefish. The more adventurous can try windsurfing, and for certified divers, there is the chance to scuba dive pristine reefs. The divers saw a nurse shark, colorful spotlight parrotfish, spotted drum, a Bermuda grouper and many other species of tropical fish and several moray eels.

A paddle upwind in the kayaks was followed by an exciting run downwind under sail.

After returning to the mainland, we proceeded to Hidden Valley Lodge, a luxurious outpost in the jungle



Extreme Escapes

The Extreme Escapes feature appears the last Sunday of every month.



where we enjoyed showering in fresh hot water and a dip in the pool and spa.

Dwane Roberge, one of our guides for the river section of the trip, wants that during the next few days in the jungle, we would often be wet. There's a reason they call it rain forest. Some of the time we would be dragging kayaks through shallow sections of the river.

The Macal river is remote — there is no easy way out once you're on it. Roberge carried a satellite phone for emergencies and could call for a helicopter evacuation if necessary.

Island Expeditions is the only company with permits to explore the river, so we had it to ourselves, along with freshwater crocodiles, scarlet macaws, blue heron, jaguars and tapirs.

"It sounds like hell, but in a fun way," said Rebecca Hopkins, from London.

If you want to experience it, you might have to hurry. The Macal River that we paddled may soon be underwater — a planned hydroelectric dam will flood the valley where howler monkeys and jaguars roam.

Greg Sho, a diminutive Mayan who has worked as a guide for National Geographic and various scientific studies in the area, supplied a running commentary on the jungle plants and animals. He told us that that gumbo limbo tree is called the "tourist tree" because

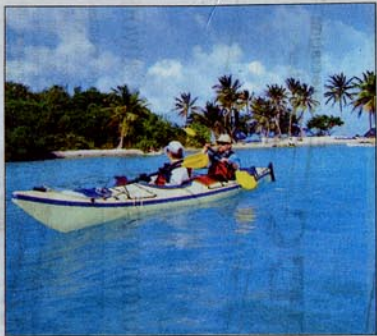
of its smell when exposed to a plant and are used in bush medicine to treat malaria, snakebite and other ills.

We spent four days paddling the slow-moving river and tributaries, which were punctuated with occasional sections of mild rapids. At night, as moonlight filtered through lacy fig trees, we paddled upstream looking for tapir, Belize's national animal. Known locally as the mountain cow, the tapir has a large hippopotamus-like body and a long snout like an aardvark.

By our last day on the river, we could spot iguanas in the trees that line the river. When startled, the iguanas drop into the river with a loud splash — a defensive move against possible predators, said Sho. He maneuvered a kayak under one of the iguanas, slapped a paddle into

the water and the creature fell into his kayak. Some locals consider green

iguanas a delicacy. But this one went back in the river. We spent our last night at



Among the sights on an excursion into Belize through Island Expeditions: a moray eel at Glover's Reef, above left; the gorgeous Garbutt's Cay as experienced by kayak, top; and ancient Mayan artifacts, above, a discovery awaiting Rebecca Hopkins of London, left, and others who waded through the entrance of the Actun Tunichil Mucnal cave.

IF YOU GO

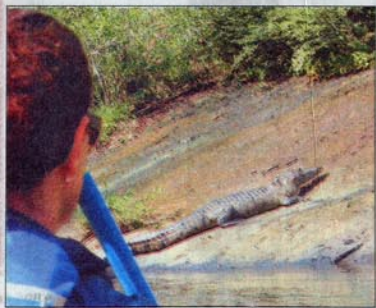
Island Expeditions' 10-night Ultimate Adventure is offered from December through April and costs \$1,988 including food, lodging, in-country transfers and use of kayaks and dry bags. Participants should be in good physical condition. For a comprehensive pretrip information packet, call (800) 667-1630 or visit www.islandexpeditions.com. For more information about the fight to preserve the Macal River see www.savebiogems.org/macal.

Pooks Hill, another jungle lodge featuring thatched-hut cabins. We showered away river mud and toasted our many adventures on the veranda.

Then it was home to more

mundane existence where it doesn't rain iguanas' and nobody eats termites. Borrrring.

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A crocodile suns itself on the banks of Belize's Macal River.

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